

FORTUNE TELLERS IN NORTHEAST YEMEN - AND IN ISRAEL

by

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Foreword

There are times when a critical look at the past can give insight into the future. However, some can look within themselves and intuitively decipher a future with a clarity that is as remarkable as it is perplexing. The internal art of predicting the future is one of the most complex aspects in the field of the occult. Though this article focuses on prognostication as it is practiced in one area of Yemen (and as later practiced in Israel by Yemenite descendants), attention to a few aspects of the phenomenon in a larger context provides important background.

The origin, development, and expansion of foretelling the future were easily integrated into already existing administrative and familial structures. This evolution was easily incorporated into cultural establishments, because each structure was able to manipulate the practice of revealing the future for individual justification. Although fortune telling was widely used within the culture, only a few people claimed the profession of prognostication. This selectivity was due to a number of factors, including the sometimes deadly consequences of an undesired or miscalculated future. Therefore the Gypsies, as an ethnic group whose members use soothsaying as daily income, are exceptional (they call their particular type of fortune telling *d'rab*, a word similar to the term *d'arb* to be discussed below).

The understanding of foresight, as formulated by the women seers mentioned in the article, solidly connects the divine and the process of foreseeing the future. The ability to recognize the future internally is perceived as a gift bestowed by God and is delegated to one among mortals whom he feels will understand this power. The idea of a connection between the Almighty and prognostication is expressed at length in the 18th-century

Christian viewpoint, where it was believed that the augury derived directly from one of two possible powers, i.e., God or Satan. The link between foresight and God stands in contrast to the view taken by Jewish sources. According to these sources, the distinction between the seer and God is definitive and those who totally accept their God have no need for divination. The Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun proposed yet another perception toward augury, stating that this activity should be forbidden on religious grounds and refuted as untrustworthy. However, Ibn Khaldun also said that the natural knowledge of prognostication accumulated should not be extirpated. Both the Jewish and the Muslim concepts of divination take the masses' feelings into consideration and allow a certain amount of acceptance. Both religions realize humans constantly desire to see clearly the trail before them. Therefore, neither religion formulated any extreme moral judgments or punishments for those who practice the art of prognostication.

It is scientifically impossible to measure prognostication with the known and accepted tools of divination. The fortune tellers explained that human perception is limited, and consequently formulating an opinion on this subject is impossible since divination goes beyond human understanding. Every time mortals came to a "dead end" in their search to explain the deep mysteries of soothsaying, they saw the failure as confirmation of their own convictions-that God is moving the minds of the seers. In our studies, we insisted that each time we stumbled and arrived at this "dead end," we recognized our blindness and leaned heavily on the soothsayers to show us the right way. However, we did not allow this dependence or the seers' simple solutions, which all pointed to the heavens, to quench our curiosity or stop our exploration.

During our course of study, we confronted two fundamental features of prognostication: 1) predictions can be ambivalent and can be interpreted in different - even contradictory - ways, and 2) a large segment of the world's population rushes to know what lies before them, though they are aware of the limitations of foresight. We shall discuss both these observations in the article.

The Jews of the al-Jawf¹ district in northeastern Yemen commonly practiced a form of predicting the future by means of combinations of stones. The method was known to the local Jews as *d'arb* (Arabic "serrated, sharp"), and to the Muslims of the area as *fal* (Arabic "divination, a sign for good"). This process was brought to Israel by Jews who emigrated from the al-Jawf region in 1950, and this system has therefore existed in Israel for only 40

1. For details on the subject area see Tchernowitz (1983, pp. 185, 198 n. 1).

years. The practice is known in Israel as *pētiḥat mazzāl*.² In this article³ we will review the various components of the *d'arb* over the course of two time spans. First, we shall examine the method's original structure in the al-Jawf district until 1949. Secondly, we shall explore the crystallization of this custom as an ongoing practice in Israel beginning approximately in 1955.

Methods of Implementation

We employed four types of observation during the course of the investigation: interviews with both fortune tellers and clients, our own participation, audio recordings, and photography. We interviewed four women who told fortunes using the *d'arb* method. Two of them, whom we will call Hanna and Ester, had pursued this occupation in al-Jawf and continued to do so after they immigrated to Israel. The others, whom we will call Na^cmeh and Mazal, took up the profession only after they arrived in Israel. Na^cmeh and Mazal came from the greater San'a region in central Yemen, and are discussed in the section below on *d'arb* in Israel. In addition, we interviewed 38 informants whose future had been foretold in Israel and/or Yemen by the above-mentioned women. The various stages of our work were planned in accordance with the diffidence and apprehension of the fortune tellers toward

2. From *pētiḥā*, "opening," and *mazzāl*, "fortune, fate, destiny, luck." One meaning of *pētiḥā* can be gleaned from Ps 55:22: "his words were softer than oil, yet were they *drawn swords*." Another is the opening of a gateway to the future in the curtain which conceals it, by means of the tools at the fortune teller's disposal. The more skillful she was, the more pertinent the information she discovered.

3. This article is a partial conclusion to a research work undertaken in Israel from 1981 to 1984. The work documents the lifestyle and material culture of the Jewish communities in northeast Yemen up to 1949. Both in the reconstruction of the fortune tellers' activities as they were in Yemen and in the manner in which they were carried out in Israel there was a blanket of secrecy. We were faced with a closed attitude toward the concealed tradition; we were also faced with requests not to publish details of the divination process. In the straining light of trying to comply:

1) We avoided sketching the unique lines of endeavor used by each of the women foretelling the future.

2) We formulated a sort of average for the characteristics in Yemen and Israel.

3) We concentrated on the central theme of life in the al-Ghil community: the subject of fortune telling there, the attitude of contemporary residents toward it, and the effect on the fortune telling process and its components. We did not treat the topic as distinct from the broader context of relationships between the Jews and Muslims in the area.

4) In the matter of the fortune tellers' activities in Israel, we dealt with the difficulties of accommodating to a generation which was not familiar with these activities at their source and the effects of this situation on present processes of prognostication.

the research, particularly relative to its penetration of the hidden domains of the *d'arb*.

Our own fortunes were told as they would have been for any other client. In this way, we were able to stay with the seers longer in an attempt to develop a relationship with them. We secretly recorded these sessions in the rooms of the fortune tellers. Later, after a more friendly rapport was established, we openly set up two tape recorders: one to play back their recorded voices, the other to record their reactions as they listened to their own voices on tape. Lastly, the whole process was documented visually on slides and film.

Jews and Muslims in the Al-Jawf District

Since the Yemenite Jewish community did not write their history, modern scholars lack documentation of early settlement in Yemen and in the area known as Arabia Felix. Until the 12th century, Jewish life in Yemen is a mystery. Information after the 12th century is derived from colophons, poetry, and other creative work that provide descriptions of Jewish communities living in the main cities (San'a, Sa'ada, Damar, and Ta'iz). Then, like day-light after centuries of darkness, fuller documentation brightens the 16th century. Because written sources are scarce until the 16th century, most of the information about Yemenite Jews derives from oral history. To what degree this oral information is "correct" or "exact" is hard to determine, yet such "history" must be considered as at least a possibility.

Over several generations, Jewish and Muslim societies coexisted side-by-side peacefully in the village of al-Ghil⁴ (pronounced *al-Gheil*) and its surroundings. During our investigation, descendants of the founders of al-Ghil's Jewish community were asked to explain the relationship which existed between the two societies before they emigrated. The informants adopted two attitudes. On the one hand, they avoided mentioning points of contact between the two cultures and spoke about existing "one alongside the other" or about "an oasis of holiness planted by our forefathers in the midst of a desert of gentiles." On the other hand, they repeated the assumptions attributed to the founders of the community describing the relationship between these two cultures, assumptions that are found in the oral tradition which circulated among respected and venerable families of al-Ghil.

4. Al-Ghil is a village in the district of al-Jawf. This area is in between Jabal al Ahmar and Ma'arib in the south and located northeast of San'a. For more information, see Yemen Mape, al Damari 1976.

According to this lore, the first group of settlers who founded the community were Jewish refugees from a destroyed village.⁵ The leader of the group, known as Barakshi, guided his people to al-Ghil and left a legacy of wisdom and sanctity. These qualities enabled the members of the group to settle in the new environment while still remaining somewhat distant from the beliefs of the nomads and shepherds who practiced magic and shared the land with the Jews. The Jews imparted their knowledge to these gentiles, an activity which helped pave the nomads' way to a permanent settlement. To affirm their peaceful intentions, the Jews revealed a hidden water source to the nomads and the shepherds, and taught them the principles of agriculture and construction. According to this oral tradition, the first person to build a house in al-Ghil was a Jew. Others, using his house as a model, followed his example.

Another distinction between the two societies appears in one of the explanatory legends that justifies the Jewish settlement in al-Ghil. By bringing them to al-Ghil, Barakshi brought them close to the home of a Jewish tribe⁶ that lived in the eastern desert near al-Ghil and was alleged to be one of the lost tribes. The tribesmen were said to be men of great courage, heroes glistening with the sweat of bravery. Barakshi led his people to the area in which a Jewish kingdom⁷ was supposed to have existed. Consequently, Jewish life in al-Ghil was considered to be the continuation of a Jewish presence in the area. The informants emphasized a belief in the ongoing Jewish ownership of the land. They also did not think that their forefathers were exposed to any social or religious influences from the non-Jewish world around them. The informants believed that the two cultures merely enjoyed commercial and a variety of formal relations without greatly influencing each other.

The Al-Ghil Community in Modern Times (1900-1948)

Verified, first-hand testimony is available concerning the al-Ghil community from the early years of this century to 1949. The Jewish population in the last years of al-Ghil's existence consisted of seven leading

5. The settlement is Brakish or Yatil. See Stookey (1978).

6. Some of the informants said that they were talking about the tribes of Gad and Reuben. Others claim that the tribe comprised non-Jews from the Land of Israel who converted to Judaism a very long time ago and called themselves "the Lost Tribe."

7. Perhaps the reference is to the kingdom of the Himyars (whom Greek literature referred to by the name "Homerites"). For details, see *Encyclopedia Britannica*, articles entitled "Arabia" and "Arab."

families made up of 61 individuals,⁸ as well as a constantly changing number of temporary residents. The men of the leading families were engaged in various occupations that included painting (i.e., decorating walls in the homes of well-to-do Muslims), trade, harness making, leatherwork, smithing and metalwork, and gold and silver jewelry-making (particularly finger rings).⁹ The temporary residents came mainly from the areas of Baraṭ, Sufyan, and Hayadan¹⁰ for short periods of time out of the need to earn some income. These transient people practiced the same occupations as the permanent residents and catered to the same customers, accepting smaller fees. This posed a significant threat to the economic security of the established residents.

Aggressive Muslim influence in the tribal hierarchy sold protection contracts (*ridama*)¹¹ for a specified period of time to those Jews who could afford it. As a result of this "solution," the Jewish families who were considered the permanent residents of al-Ghil developed an ambivalent attitude towards the temporary inhabitants. On the one hand, the Jewish families treated their guests with hospitality, even making empty houses available for their use.¹² On the other hand, the Jews forced their visitors to seek alternative markets and in some cases prevented them from pursuing their professions in the al-Ghil district. While the Jewish settlers were the instigators of the practices which hindered the itinerants from making money, the Jews themselves did not directly deal with the problem. Instead, the Jewish residents paid a non-Jew to bully the temporary settlers from wanting to attain jobs. This economic guard was a stranger from outside the community, the Muslim "protector" (*jār*). The Jews paid a sum greater than that of the protection agreement, half to the *jār* and half to other tribesmen. These deals were conducted mostly in the afternoon when the "protectors" sit to chew the Qat and the Baldur.¹³

8. These families were Basal, Hiba, 'Arji, ben Sa'id, Sherarah and Assad. Rabbi Zechariah lived in another village.

9. These professions are not detailed in this article. The subject is mentioned as a background to the discord between the oldtimers and newcomers mentioned herein.

10. On the connection between the districts, see note 1.

11. Examples of *ridama* contracts purchased by al-Ghil residents and their terms: the Ashraf-A'uran *ridama* was contracted for a three year period for a price of thirty Riyals; the Ambarak *ridama* was contracted for a period of six months against a monthly fee of two Riyals.

12. There were houses whose owners had died and which were used to fulfill community needs.

13. *Q'at*: *Gelastus edulis Forsk.* A shrub or tree whose leaves contain an alkaloid which produces a mild euphoric effect. Habitually chewed by Yemenites, both Muslims and Jews. It is also grown and used by Yemenite Jewish families living in Israel.

According to our informants, certain Muslim cultural values were adopted by the modern-day Jewish inhabitants of al-Ghil, including Muslim magical cults.¹⁴ The following three traditions are among those which the Jews absorbed:

- 1) *Musafla* ("the woman who descends") was the name for women who occasionally fell asleep for days at a time, during which time they were alleged to make contact with the deceased forefathers of the family.
- 2) Young men and women played a game after the Sabbath on Saturday nights in which they touch each other with a loaf of bread. If on the same night one dreamed about the other, it was a sign that they were meant for one another.
- 3) The *d'arb* (*fal*) were the visions of a clairvoyant that help her divine the future.

All three of these magical practices are based on dreams or visions. Of these, the present article will explore the *d'arb*.

The D'arb

Until the end of the 1920s, the *d'arb* was practiced exclusively by Muslim women. They carried out their prognostications for both Muslims and Jews in their homes in the al-Ghil area. Jews from town would come to their houses either while working there for wages or while passing through the Arab villages to other destinations for commerce.

Though the Jewish informants tended to belittle the importance of these predictions, they turned to divination to satisfy their curiosity and with a vague hope that the predictions of divination were a glimpse of a strangely packaged truth. However, these Jews showed a measure of doubt in the wisdom, skill, and reliability of the seers mainly because they were Muslims. Due to this mistrust, some avoided giving the women any information

Baldur. Atropa belladonna. Commonly called "deadly nightshade" or "dwale," it is related to the potato. Its leaves and berries contain solanine, atropine, and other alkaloids which, while fatally toxic in moderate quantities, produce a euphoric or intoxicant effect in small amounts.

14. One must remark that the Muslim magic which infiltrated the Jewish dwelling areas was very selective; only a very few magical practices were selected, and even these underwent changes in form and content in the Jewish sphere. This assumption is true at all times when there was no fierce contention between the craftsmen who were denizens of the area and those who were temporary residents. However, as the conflict between the two groups of artisans intensified, Muslim magic penetrated deeper and deeper into the Jewish precincts, mainly because of the connection which existed between the Jewish artists and their Muslim protectors.

concerning themselves, their families, or their communities in the course of conversation which usually accompanied the augury, and they naturally restrained their criticism of the Muslim environment. In the Jews' opinion, imparting such information could only have harmed their cordial relationships with the Muslim community. The Jews had further reservations concerning the types of tools the seers used, for on the fortune telling plate there were bones and pieces of meat that, in the eyes of the Jews, were contaminated.¹⁵

After the two magic practices ("the woman who descends" and the young people's dream game) were introduced and incorporated into Jewish life, one of the two families that initiated this merge decided to offer the *d'arb* as well. The dubious title of the community's first fortune teller was bestowed on one of the women in the family who later convinced her sister to join her.

Fortune Tellers

The two sisters, Hanna and Ester, were born in the village of al-Ghil. At a tender age, Ester married a man from the Baraṭ district and went to live in his house, while Hanna remained in al-Ghil, her home. Since she had been a child, Hanna showed a zealous interest in housework, women's crafts, and helping younger girls with various tasks. In her youth, Hanna's curiosity inspired her to accompany the midwives and professional mourners whose work she studied until she became proficient in these occupations.

The men in her family occasionally went to the Muslim village of al-Harība to earn money. This village was situated in the area controlled by the family's protector, so the men were able to work there without being harassed. There were also members of their family living in al-Harība, a fact that allowed them to remain there for a time. A Muslim woman named Tashya also lived in al-Harība and her calling was foretelling the future. On one of their visits to the village, the men of the family took Hanna with them and introduced her to Tashya. Hanna was fascinated by this Muslim woman's intricate and complex trade, her wisdom that seemed to come from within and without at the same time, and the respect bestowed upon her by the people. Hanna observed Tashya's work, and her fascination for the art of fortune telling kept her there for a year. During this period, Hanna realized that she was, in fact, gifted with the "second sight" required of seers. Amazed and excited by this revelation, Hanna freely talked about her internal discovery. In her own words, Hanna showed her justification that she was given the

15. The Muslim fortune tellers would make round hollow shapes from pieces of meat. According to them, they could see the future in the hollow spaces.

ability to understand the voice of God: "...and I dreamed a dream, and afterwards sat (and thought about it), and the dream would not lie; it came from God."

As the relationship between Hanna and Tashya continued, Hanna's reputation spread and Muslim women told more and more people who turned to this new energetic foreteller of the future. In order to meet the increasing demand, Hanna was forced to deviate from the normal routines of the average village woman: she took time to engage in divination a few hours each day, returning to her housework and other chores afterwards. After she was married and her domestic workload increased, she had to turn away many people requesting her services. She conducted her first sessions in the homes of the residents (permanent or temporary). However, Hanna avoided predicting the futures of those in her own family. By not telling the futures of her family, Hanna emphasized that her work was not a family matter but a communal one.

In addition to her work as a seer, Hanna continued to labor as a midwife and a healer to the women in her village. Some members of the community criticized her severely. To these scolding admonitions Hanna paid close attention, for Hanna knew that if she did not explain her choice, drastic measures to deal with her could materialize. Some of her discreditors insisted on linking Hanna's work with witchcraft, whoredom, adultery, and murder.¹⁶ Hanna replied to her detractors that everything is in the hands of the Lord, and by His will the *d'arb* exists, and by God's will *d'arb* will be practiced or by His will this tradition will cease. If the *d'arb* has penetrated into Jewish life, this is an expression of God's direction to differentiate between Jewish and Muslim divination. The Lord wishes the Jews to incorporate the medium but alter the art. Hanna insisted that she would let the mighty hand of God lead her in the right direction and in turn show others the way as long as it is in her power to cooperate with the will of God. To those who had not witnessed the *d'arb* but offered their criticism anyway, Hanna suggested they hold their words and first observe her process and then evaluate it.

After her sister Ester was divorced and returned to al-Ghil from Barat, Hanna trained her to practice fortune telling. The services were divided between the two sisters, based on the members of the community. A differentiation was also made between the augury for Jews and for Muslims. Those who were less able to pay with money brought Hanna what they could

16. Death by stoning as a punishment for witchcraft is mentioned in the Talmud: *B Sanhedrin* 83b; *Vayikra Raba* 43; *Bereshith Raba* 65.

afford in coins (*bukāsh*)¹⁷ and in foods such as oil, wheat, and honey. The wealthier clients had their futures predicted by Ester, who was paid large sums of money in advance. Hanna performed prognostication only for Jews in the community. All the Muslims were referred to Ester, and among her clients were members of the *Ashrāf* (the elite of the Muslim tribes) and the *ʿabdu* (the servants of the wealthy Muslims).

Procedures and Methods of Prognostication

Hanna changed some of the procedures which the original Muslim fortune tellers used. For example, she rejected the method of examining the contents of the plates set before the fortune teller through large pieces of broken glass.¹⁸ Secondly, Hanna used the stones¹⁹ taken from the tombs of the founding fathers to predict the future. These tombs were found in the ruins of the ancient Jewish settlements in the region and included the grave of the Jewish poet-saint Rabbi Shalom Shabazi, whose tomb was situated in the South Yemen region of Taʿiz. The forefathers would stir the thoughts of God and the poet-saint would give those thoughts voice. Lastly Hanna discontinued the use of pieces of bone and meat.

Informants who visited the seers tried to observe when exactly the connection with God took place during the soothsaying. Some thought the internal process began the moment the client sat before the fortune teller and ended when the seers stopped talking. None of these informants attempted to analyze the nature of the divination or to understand its procedures. They considered the prediction process belonged to certain blessed individuals and that the fascination came from God in the form of dreams to the fortune tellers.

Each of the informants who sought predictions presented the seer a mere synopsis of the problem in a short period of time. The seers do not view a problem in isolation, for the fortune tellers remember the returning client's past dilemmas and connect the problem with these past issues while at the same time forecasting the future. An individual's quandaries are brought about from

17. *Bukāsh* - The Yemenite *riyal* was divided into forty *bukāsh*.

18. Hanna's Muslim teacher divined the future with stones, in the village of Khariba, but for the augury itself peered through pieces of broken glass. In Hanna's opinion, there was no need for this. She claims that Muslim seers did this only to impress their clients.

19. There are a few parallels to the use of stones for prognostication mentioned in Biblical and Talmudic sources: such stones were well-known, and called *halash* (*M Shabbat* 23:2), *pūr* (*Esther* 3:7), *goral* (*Numbers* 26:55), *payis* (*B Yoma* 22), and *hevel* (*Hosea* 13:13). From the semantic point of view, these stones were identified with Fate.

a matrix of personal events, conceivably beginning with birth and interacting until death. The vision with which the clairvoyant is endowed enables her to perceive the connection between present plights and the client's continuing dilemmas from the past and in the future.

According to the fortune tellers, the process of augury begins with the entrance of the customer into the room. Upon entry, there are four stages in the examination of the problem: *tar'ish* ("the noises"), spitting,²⁰ conversation, concentration, and prediction. In the stage of *tar'ish*, the seer observes the noises made by the client, such as the heaviness of the footsteps, the force with which the door is closed, and any drumming on the table or tapping on the floor. One of the fortune tellers would leave an empty can near the customer's chair, while another would spread gravel on the floor and listen to the client's footsteps. The assumption, of course, is that the sounds made by the distressed individual will reflect the annoyance, anger, pain, or particular emotion associated with the problem. *Tar'ish* is the inclusive term for all the different sounds made by the person seeking divination.

In the conversational stage, the customer and the seer interact verbally. From the moment the person sits down, the seer begins to reinforce the impressions she has received from the *tar'ish*. She notices the color of the client's face, the pupils of the eyes, and the color of the fingernails.

The stage of concentration involves the interpretation of the contact between the client and the fortune teller. During this internal process, she asks for God's help and blessing to reach a correct explanation of the augury. In various tones and voices, the fortune teller calls upon God and the family's ancestors to assist her.

20. Spitting is pictured in photograph #5. Such an act could be viewed in different ways, such as:

- A. The fortune teller spits into a gauze or muslin cloth, simultaneously uttering syllables that have no significance to the listener. It may be that she does this to separate segments of the prognostication: between an explanation and the one following, or between one client and the next.
- B. She spits after mentioning harmful names, or after seeing *rashad'im* - signs of evil portent - in her augury. There are no *rashad'im* evils here but *ra'ashim* noises, referring to footsteps and movements of body as well as to "psychological" ones, referring to anxiety and discomfort.
- C. The spitting is done openly, in such a way as to make clear that she herself wants to avoid the "nefarious powers" that come to her as a result of the prognostications.

In the fourth stage, the seer casts the instruments of divination²¹ onto the plate and, hopefully, correctly defines their positions. The instruments are *hajar* (black and white stones), *ʿajima* (dates), *wadʿa* (sea shells), and *sini* (shards of pottery). Each item has its own unchangeable significance. They are categorized as male and female stones and stones of fortune (stones of success and failure, health and illness, death, disaster). The importance of one subject over another is determined in accordance with the way in which one stone covers another. The seers conclude from the extent of the coverage whether the prediction is definite or subject to change. If a stone remains standing without falling on its side, a state of indecision results. For example, if the subject is war and all of the stones are lying flat down, this means mass death. In one case, the fortune teller saw the dead lying prone because of the way the stones were arranged. The seer saw the women who came to mourn them. Another interpretation may have been that the women were actually the relatives who descended from the celestial worlds to welcome the spirits of the newly dead.

The D'arb in Al-Ghil

It was not very long, according to our informants, before most of the community's adult inhabitants were asking to have their fortunes told. As a consequence the length of the fortune teller's meetings with the customers was extended. This extra time gave the clients an opportunity to connect their present predicaments with other family difficulties. In this way, the seer was able to collect many details concerning the families of al-Ghil. This precious information was augmented by other details of which the fortune teller became thoroughly informed as a healer and midwife. Since the seer knew many of the intimate personal problems of the community, she also accumulated a great deal of power.

The people of the community sought out the fortune teller for advice on anything from business connections to travel plans hidden from a spouse to dilemmas between the Jews and the *jār*. Her consultations encompassed virtually every aspect of their lives. When the possible development of a conflict between two families became evident to her, Hanna asked herself whether or not she should step in and prevent the confrontation. If she

21. The impression is that it is not the nature of the implements that counts, but their existence in the fortune telling plate. The magical significance of combining the implements can devolve upon various utensils. During the research, various additional items were put into the plate, and these were exchanged for others; these changes were not rejected by the fortune teller.

thought that the conflict would be damaging to the families involved, Hanna would intervene. She would summon one of the individuals involved and, during the divination process, would suggest an alternative course of action.

In addition to personal forecasting, Hanna practiced for the benefit of the community as a whole. Hanna would divine the future of the community on her own initiative. She foresaw the arrival of the King's troops in al-Ghil, visits that were uncomfortable for the Jewish residents since they were obliged to cater to every need of the soldiers. Hanna predicted the occasions on which bandits would come to Jewish homes and, accordingly, the *jāreen* were asked to prevent potential robberies.

One of the expressions Hanna routinely uttered was "God protect us from strangers." Indeed, the presence of the temporary residents living within the community angered her, as it angered the community's first families. It may be that she viewed these "strangers" as a threat to the families' income or to their standings, or perhaps she worried that another fortune teller would enter her area. In sessions with clients who were permanent residents, Hanna would often predict that "someone" was going to steal from their earnings. She left it to their imaginations to fill in the details and to act accordingly.

The following phrases are from two segments of the tapes which we recorded. In the first segment, Hanna foresees a number of evils befalling her client: a confrontation with a person of importance, some kind of decision not to his liking, the death of someone close to him, poverty and need, and finally illness and vengeance of a brother (it is possible that she means a relative).

*Haya howa'a*²² - I'm not in the mood, my life is worthless. If an important person comes to you and you get angry, and someplace there is a person and he will write (decide). (Prediction 1A:) I don't know whether you will die. (Prediction 1B:) And he will bring you the letter (decision). You will see him bringing you food. (Prediction 2:) See how your brother gets angry. Lord, take pity upon us and show us mercy; to God, in God, reject this evil.

In the second segment, she recommends that her client seek the "good" elsewhere, meaning that he should leave the place where he presently lives.

22. *Haya howa'a*, etc. are phrases used to express the reluctance of the fortune teller to perform an augury.

O Fortune, preserve us from strangers. There is one Word (Law) as there is in the Land. Here, she stands, she thinks perhaps she is in another place. Perhaps good will come upon you. Here, the reason is before you, and she (the stones) stands, and didn't speak to you, and she will come near once again, and she speaks to you (listen to what is the problem), and this is the reason. You and your luck.

There is no way of knowing today to what extent these revelations influenced the decisions of the temporary residents to leave the area, or if those who left did so directly because of the predictions.

The Language of Prognostication

Each session contained similar expressions, from the opening sentence to the prediction to the concluding sentence. Though the contents of the predictions varied, the same opening and closing words were repeated at different times. Some examples appear in the segments above; others are:

Kul min Kh'raj min idaq a'mak. You are blind to anything not under your direct control.

Ya rabbi yarhamna yesh lana 'alf ribo' 'avoda. O lord, have mercy upon us, for our work is beyond counting.

Mahala giti uma had min al mafri'im. The anger is great, and there is no stopping it.

Allah qal lak faraj kul yom 'alf faraj. God will give you a thousand solutions each day.

The language is a mixture of Hebrew and Arabic. The Hebrew is not precise and does not differentiate between genders. There are Arabic phrases with Hebrew endings and vice versa found within the language of al-Ghil (for the language of the Yemenite Jews in general see Morag [1963], Ratzaby [1978], and Caspi [1982]; for the language used by women in Yemen see Caspi [1985]).

The D'arb in Israel

There was no evidence of prognostication after the villages were evacuated on the way from al-Jawf to the immigration camp. The fortune tellers arrived in Israel with their families in 1949-50 and lived in transit camps. Until the fortune tellers were more permanently settled (three in moshavim, i.e., collective agricultural settlements, and a fourth remained in the transit camp

that ultimately became a town) and felt rooted in their new surroundings, predictions were not uttered from their lips. During this period Hanna and Ester were also not asked to exercise their powers. But towards the end of the transit camp duration, remembering the sisters' performances back in al-Ghil, their followers asked them to resume their art of the *d'arb* in Israel. The people's requests carried a tone of both jesting and nostalgia. While the men played backgammon with stones, they teasingly chided the fortune tellers, suggesting they too throw their stones into the plate. When the men met women of their former community, they encouraged them to return to divination. However, in a place of such diversity, introducing a new cultural feature was nothing that the Israelis observed as a novelty of any importance. Therefore, around the beginning of the 1960s, the elderly immigrants from al-Jawf formed a nucleus of clients, but the core group of believers steadily died. The deadly poison of disinterest was prevalent in the *d'arb* as the generation of believers began to die in Israel.

The Clients

The fortune tellers classified their clients in Israel into two main groups. The first was comprised of people (mostly women) who originated from near al-Ghil in Yemen. They were inclined to accept the findings with a large measure of faith and an attitude of resignation. They viewed the fortune tellers with the same respect that was attributed to them in al-Ghil. Since this was a cultural phenomenon from their original homes, these emigrants held the predictions as truths close to their breasts as though they were clutching a part of their homes they missed. These clients chose to come early in the morning—men after prayers, women on their way to work or shopping—and most came alone. A few of the customers came early because they held the belief that those who precede them can impose a curse on their prognostication, spoiling their fortune. For this reason, the clients even avoided meeting other customers in the fortune teller's house. The greeting they used to address the fortune tellers was the same one used to greet the seers in Yemen: *Ihna nishti al-d'arb* ("We beseech you to tell our fortune"), or *Tadrubi lana* ("Predict for us").

The second group varied in composition and was comprised of family members, friends, and close associates of the former group. There were others whose families came from Africa, Asia, and Europe; some had come to Israel when they were young, and others were born there. Most of the members within the second group fell between the ages of 18 and 38. To many, the idea of fortune telling was a foreign one; some of them had heard of

divination at home and others had heard from friends and colleagues. Those more familiar with it told their past experiences and emphasized the accuracy or method of the mature *d'arb*. Members of this second group decided to have their futures foretold as a response to some sort of failure, such as financial loss, or personal or familial distress. Usually, a number of weeks went by between the decision to consult a fortune teller and the actual visit.

Members of this second group expressed reservations concerning the magical *Weltanschauung* of the seers. Most of these individuals lost interest when the fortune tellers exhibited static behavior (concentration, lack of movement), but they showed pleasure when the fortune tellers used vocalization and the movements of their hands and body. These individuals tended to bring others with them to the sessions, unlike the first group. Their assessment of the prognostication was accompanied with adjectives such as "nice" or "interesting." There were also those who looked upon the *d'arb* as a form of entertainment. With this attitude and a lack of confidence in the essence of the *d'arb*, many of these clients did not repeat their visits to the fortune teller.

Everyone who sought out a soothsayer had certain expectations of their meeting. These hopes were built on stories heard or information acquired from people who visited other fortune tellers. In addition, wisdom and capability were translated by some clients into monetary values: the demand for a seer's services was affected by the conditions in which she lived. Such clients thought that if the fortune teller herself could not make her own economic situation better how could she help theirs. In those poor times, most of the seers lived in dilapidated shacks provided by the Jewish Agency. The only extras these shacks contained were a storeroom and an enclosed porch used for laundry; the living conditions could not be hidden by holding the sessions in a different designated room. They had no separate room to receive the public. The augury was performed side by side with household chores such as laundry and cooking on a noisy Primus stove.

The seers, of course, preferred clients from the first group, mainly because of their immediate frankness in discussing their problems and the fascinated respect they offered the fortune tellers. This preference also extended to those who continued to pay in the traditional manner with some food rather than with all money.²³ The clairvoyants were not happy to perform for the second group, since the seers realized that generally it was simply a performance

23. The bringing of food to the person requesting a prognostication indicates need or poor health.

giving rise to gossip. For this reason, the procedure was simplified and shortened. The complaints of the fortune tellers that follow are examples of how little the customers understood the predictions.

Some of the clients heralded their first arrival with various sounds such as blowing the car horn, playing the radio, jingling keys, shouting, swearing, or singing. The seers read the latent message inherent in these noises: the client, even before he entered the house, was announcing that he was short of time and patience. The women were astute enough to shorten the sessions in accordance with the moods of these customers. They omitted a few structural elements, such as repeating the throwing of the divination stones into the plate. One seer utilized the significance of these noises to her advantage. In Yemen, she would hang pendants on the necks of the goats and camels in addition to the bells they wore. In this way their disquietude or ill-health was easily read by the additional racket. She applied the same principle to her clients: the disrespectful noise often allowed her to decipher the customers' moods, the state of their health, and the nature of the problems which brought them to her. The psychics were not dependent on external appearances, but they used the sounds the customer made to clear the vision of their internal turmoil.

The soothsayers recalled a few clients who during the session had trouble specifying exactly what was bothering them. By not recognizing their own problems, these customers were very difficult for the fortune tellers to help, since the problem could not be revealed in its entirety. At first, startled, the seers would bring this difficulty to the clients' attention. Later the fortune tellers stopped after it became evident that these individuals did not know how to accept criticism and often deflected the comments off of themselves, turning the judgment to the soothsayers' lack of ability. Two of the seers mentioned a loss of concentration from time to time and offered several reasons for this phenomenon, targetting the clients as the cause: clothing and make-up in loud, clashing colors; body odors, sometimes mixed with perfume; cigarette smoke, at times exhaled in their faces; chewing gum; cracking nuts and seeds; and spitting. All these factors were unavoidably obvious to fortune tellers trained to keenly observe subtle details. Usually such acute awareness was helpful during divination, but the soothsayers' overloaded senses often blocked their internal process.

A further element that made prognostication difficult for the psychics was the state of agitation of some of the customers, illustrated in some of the behavior already discussed. Some of the clients came in the middle of their working day, eager to be received immediately and return to their

employment. These customers often came to the seers at this time of day so the busy public would not notice their presence at the fortune teller's home. The haste of these clients caused friction with others waiting and put pressure on the person who was in consultation. These customers' loud disagreeable voices forced the feeling in the air to fill with anger and this emotion affected the validity of the divination. This same hostility was reflected in the predictions of these clients and often masked their real problems.

Many customers tried in various ways to comprehend the essence of clairvoyance. Their questions touched upon, for example, the connection between the devices used in prognostication with the ability to perceive the future, the degree of authenticity of the predictions, the significance of the sounds she makes, and the meaning of the fortune teller's facial expressions and hand movements. Although these questions were signs of interest, often they were disrespectfully asked and were asked only out of either monetary interest or in quest to disprove the validity of divination. Two of the practitioners in our study retired due to all these negative aspects of fortune telling; the others developed linguistic and behavioral means of adaptation.

The following is a segment from a dialogue between a seer and one of her clients.

The Fortune Teller	The Client
1. <i>Haya howa'a</i> - I can't speak! I'm not in the mood, my life is simply worthless!	2. <i>Yallah, yallah</i> - go already. (A hurrying motion of the hand toward the stones.)
3. It's coming smoothly. One smaller than you will speak, and he'll be angry with you...it's coming in smoothly.	4. What's coming in to me? Only expenses all day, only today.... Nothing is coming in to me, you know.
5. Quiet! You're speaking - you're with one girl, alone, she -	6. Don't tell me "Quiet"! I pay you for....
7. (A motion of the hand - a dismissal of the client.)	8. And what about my time?
9. You are speaking with a girl alone, she will be happy with your words.... (A sharp blow to the tabletop.) She will be happy with what you say (angry look at client), a bit, and perhaps you will be happy as well.	10. Listen, I'm not the one who....

11. (She lifts the plate and knocks it on the table. She makes a silencing motion with her hand towards the customer. The silence remains suspended in the air for some time.) Sit and listen, or go!

From this point on, the customer did not speak again; there was an obvious breach between the two. The session terminated a few minutes later. The fortune teller made use of movements and expressions during the divination to force the intimidated clients to close their lips. The soothsayer, realizing the need to adapt to the discourteous public, created external manipulations to curb the intruding viciousness of the customers, who lacked the awe that promoted prognostication. For example, the seers used more dramatic movements of the hands to retrieve the lost intensity, or the fortune tellers used articles of clothing (cloak, scarf) to enlarge the apparent size of her body. The seers altered their appearance to daunt threatening clients, much as animals use physical expansion when intimidation is needed (cf., the toad puffs up, the cobra extends his hood, and birds straighten certain plumage). The soothsayers utilized this external technique as indicators of strength and power. In the taped segment presented above, these external modes did not receive the needed response and the fortune teller had to raise her voice to regain control of the session. In doing so, the seer alienated herself from the client and lost the necessary concentration required to conduct the divination.

Subjects Presented to the D'arb

Problems which were brought before the fortune tellers more than ten times were the lack of a spouse, setting a wedding date, impotence, illness (real or imagined), economic difficulties, purchase of property, being fired from a job, the need to emigrate, fear of war, and the well-being of a soldier in Lebanon (1980-1983).

There were extraordinary incidents of which we shall mention two. The first had to do with the professional destiny of a young singer. Despite her frequent performances and the great demand among certain audiences to hear her, she felt that she was losing the quality of her voice. The session was held late at night due to her fear that someone would see her. Na^cmeh predicted that the singer would continue to have public performances and her success would grow with each of her performances. When Na^cmeh told us about the incident a few days later, the fortune teller explained her true

prediction for the singer. She said the singer would continue to sing for only a few more years, after which her performances would end. She could not tell the singer the truth, to Na'meh's sorrow, because her appearances brought so much pleasure to so many people.

The second incident touches upon Na'meh's attempt to help one of her clients in a way that was opposed to the findings of the augury. The client told her that his son's teacher had hurt the child's feelings by repeatedly insulting the parents of the children. According to the client, no one could stop this evil educator. The prognostication Na'meh conducted for the man revealed that all the complaints he made about the teacher were rejected (for reasons she saw in detail), and that in actuality the parents were harassing the educator. Na'meh asked the man to return in a few days. In the meantime, she asked a relative of hers who, by virtue of his public position and work, she thought might be able to confirm or deny what she saw in her revelation. When Na'meh's relative investigated the situation, he explained to her that the findings of his inquiry were identical with those of the divination: complaints against the father confirmed his belligerence as the problem, and the teacher's twenty-year career as an effective educator provided her with sufficient vindication. In both incidents the community benefitted by the soothsayer's responses to the problems. In many ways, fortune tellers were the social workers of the society in which they lived, for the seers took the responsibility of the community upon their own shoulders.

Summary

As a fortune teller, Hanna had to pass through various stages in her professional development: she did household chores alongside other women, as well as midwifery, therapy, popular medicine, and finally the *d'arb*. Though we do not know to what degree she calculated the steps of her advancement, we do know that she utilized these skills to benefit her capabilities and hence her value. Hanna merged elements of midwifery and therapy with the *d'arb*, something unique in her society. Having acquired such strength, she ensured that the community was dependent upon her. Hanna was fully aware of the power she held in the community. Bringing Ester into the profession with her ensured Hanna the full weight of the community's reliance upon her.

An example of Hanna's use of such political and social power was her non-violent solution to the problems between the permanent and temporary residents. In the period before Hanna became active in her profession, the community's custom was for the permanent residents to bring their complaints

concerning the transients to their Muslim protector (*jār*). It was then the protector's responsibility to harass the travelers to search for wages elsewhere. During Hanna's practice, messages from the old-timers were entrusted to her and then edited before these notes reached the newcomers. Hanna altered these messages so that the issues would remain but the insults would be taken out so that the objectives could be achieved. In this manner, the services of the *jār* were waived. The close-knit, independent community once more did not need outsiders solving their internal problems.

In this article we have discussed the dual aspects of fortune telling, the human and the mystical. Inherent in the process of fortune telling is the connection the seer makes with her clients. With all the information she gathers, sometimes from previous predictions, the soothsayer is able to diagnose the client's emotional and physical condition. In addition to this human connection, the fortune teller is connected to an internal vision which is bestowed by God. Objects found in everyday life help her clear the path to her internal awareness. For example, the straw plate (*mieda*) has many uses in the day-to-day tasks; in divination, the *mieda* (with the stones it holds) becomes a symbol of the future. This second use of such an ordinary object is a palpable sign that she is directly connected with the "world beyond." The utilization of such a plain earthly device for lighting the path of the future known only to God is, in the minds of the followers, a demonstration that there is a true link. This sign is that which the seer's public needs to retain its belief in her predictions and her wisdom.

Toward the end of our study, only one fortune teller remained active. A colleague who retired from the profession remarked, "they will go to her, and seize the *d'arb* that they need and deserve, and accept it...the *d'arb* is as they are, only it is always a bit more preferable to them than themselves."²⁴

24. Our profound thanks to the Baṣal, Sherarah, and Yemini families for their great help in this investigation. Thanks to M. Masyura, photographer, who accompanied the research; the photographs included in the article are the fruits of his labors.

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